

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 13, 2015

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Female homesteader's letters available on South Dakota Digital Archives

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives recently added a collection of 186 letters written by early South Dakota female homesteader Elizabeth “Bachelor Bess” Corey to the South Dakota Digital Archives.

Corey moved from Marne, Iowa, to South Dakota in 1909. She was young, single and never married, but she successfully homesteaded in an era where many others failed. The letters, dated from 1909 to 1919, were written by Elizabeth to her family in Iowa and were often signed “Bachelor Bess” or “B.B.”

“The Corey letters offer a unique glimpse into the experiences of a single woman homesteading on the prairies of western South Dakota in the 1910s,” said State Archivist Chelle Somsen.

The Elizabeth Corey Letters are accessible by visiting the State Archives website at history.sd.gov/archives and finding the link to “Elizabeth Corey,” or by searching directly at the South Dakota Digital Archives.

By working as a schoolteacher each winter and occasionally working during the summers as a cook or house cleaner, Corey was able to earn enough money to finance needed improvements on her claim.

The letters detail her day-to-day encounters from the 10-year period on her homestead west of Fort Pierre along the Bad River in Stanley County. She eventually “proved up” by 1919 and the 160-acre claim was hers.

One of Corey’s early letters, dated June 6, 1909, relates her first dance at Hayes.

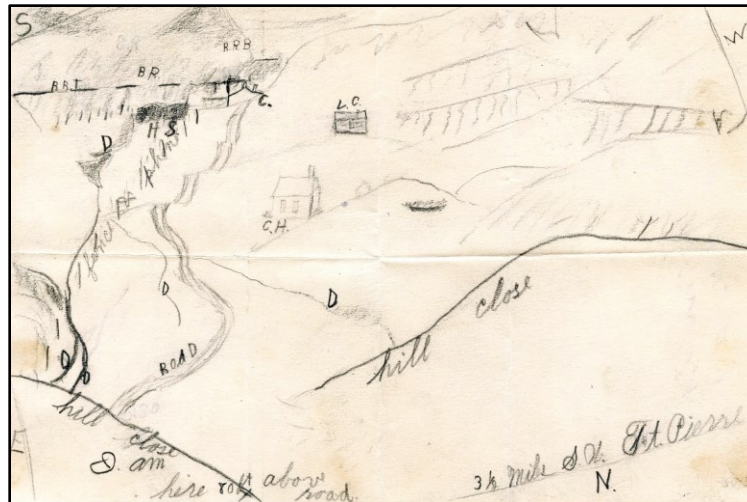
“There was a big Hop at the hall in Hayes on Friday evening. The claim holders both men and women for miles around rode in and they had a fine time. People in a new country get acquainted rather quickly and in twenty four hours I found myself somewhat acquainted in Hayes...”

She also related various events connected to her school students. Her December 28, 1909, letter notes, “Wednesday evening I came home after school and made candy till half after eleven—am getting to be a gimsnuffer at making candy—can make four kinds...Took a syrup pail of candy to school Thursday—it didn’t take the youngsters long to make it look tired.”

Corey also writes to her mother concerning a mid-March storm in 1913.

"Last Monday and Tuesday were very warm and Wednesday was misty. Thursday it was mist, rain and snow by spells. By five o'clock it was storming to beat seven of a kind. It grew worse and worse and by Friday morning it was the worst blizzard I ever saw and I never expect to see a worse one."

The South Dakota Digital Archives, an online resource launched in January 2012 by the South Dakota State Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre, provides researchers digital access to unique historical records.



Editor's Note: Elizabeth Corey drew the attached map in her October 2, 1910, letter, which included her location, "I am here," at bottom left. Other identified items include the Bad River "B.R.," railroad track "R.R.T.," and railroad bridge "R.R.B.," in the upper left corner. The schoolhouse "C.H." is located at the center of the drawing. A road and various hills were also drawn in the letter. (Photo courtesy South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives)

The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society, an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.